

GUIDELINES FOR THE CATECHESIS OF CHILDREN

EPARCHY OF NEWTON OFFICE OF CATECHESIS AND EVANGELIZATION

INTRODUCTION

Every Christian receives in Holy Baptism the gift of God's Life, which is lived out most fully in the mystical-liturgical life of the Church. And every person, through the Mystery of Holy Baptism, receives the vocation *to share* that Life with others.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:18 – 20)

In our Byzantine tradition, the traditional form or method of religious education is known as "liturgical catechesis"¹ because its main purpose and aim is to incorporate the individual person ever deeper into the mystical life of the Church. Simply stated, religious education seeks to reveal the truth of our transformation in Christ which began on the day we were baptized and made members of His Body, the Church. Liturgical catechesis, then, is intimately tied to, founded upon, and directed toward the Liturgy, because it is in the Liturgy that the fullness of Divine Life is revealed and communicated.

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:30 – 32)

The guidelines and directives outlined below are offered at the direction of our Eparch, Bishop Nicholas Samra, in order to ensure continuity with and fidelity to this rich tradition of Byzantine liturgical catechesis in our Melkite Greek-Catholic Church in America.

THE NEED FOR CATECHETICAL GUIDELINES

The Eparchy of Newton faces diverse and multifaceted challenges in offering a catechetical program that meets the needs and demands of our parishes, missions, and outreaches. Some smaller and aging parishes do not have enough students to warrant a full complement of catechetical classes. Larger, established parishes may be using catechetical books that have been "grandfathered" in and are not part of the approved *God With Us* series. New advances in technology and increased mobility of people due to improved transportation and communications present opportunities as well as challenges to the

¹ Much of what is developed in these Eparchial Guidelines, including this and other quotations, is drawn from *Liturgy and Life: Lectures and Essays on Christian Development through Liturgical Experience*, Alexander Schmemmann. New York: Dept. of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, 1974. Catechists are encouraged to read this seminal work in its entirety.

regular and continued religious formation of our children. These factors, as well as requests from Pastors and the results of Eparchial catechetical assessments have shown the need to present these Eparchial Catechetical Guidelines. By uniting our catechetical efforts and standardizing the structure of our parish catechetical programs, we will begin to work together across geographic, ethnic, and other boundaries for the sake of the next generation of Melkites in the United States. Through this united effort, we hope that the next generation will be well formed in the teachings of the faith we have all received, live a vibrant Christian life within our Melkite tradition, and be prepared to pass on that faith and life to others.

EPARCHIAL GUIDELINES FOR CATECHESIS IN ACCORD WITH THE BYZANTINE TRADITION

The Apostolic Tradition of the Christian East, as it is received and lived in the Byzantine Churches today, offers a distinctive and effective approach to catechesis. This approach is, as mentioned above, *liturgical* in nature. This means that all catechesis should be intimately tied to, founded upon, and directed toward the Liturgy, in which the fullness of Divine Life is revealed. In other words, the Liturgy – its richness, beauty, and rhythm – is the beating heart of catechesis in the Byzantine Tradition. It is therefore the primary place where the foundational truths of the Christian faith are communicated to God’s people. *As such, participation in the Liturgy, especially the Sunday Divine Liturgy, is an essential first step in authentic Catechesis.* Therefore, the first guideline for an authentic catechetical approach within our Byzantine Tradition as defined by the Eparchy of Newton is that **catechetical classes are to take place at a time that does not conflict with Sunday Divine Liturgy.**

A second guideline for an authentic catechetical approach within our Byzantine Tradition is that **catechesis should be primarily experiential in nature** and doctrinal formation as part of catechesis should be rooted in and flow from liturgical experience. Catechesis in the Byzantine tradition is not simply the communication of Church doctrines but a process by which the Catechist leads the student to see and experience transformation in the grace of Divine Life. *Theosis*, or divinization (participation in God’s very Life), is not merely a doctrine that we talk about, but the life in which we seek to grow in the context of our Liturgy and catechetical programs. As such, catechetical classes are to be built upon, structured around, and directed towards a fuller participation in the Divine Liturgy, as well as a fuller participation in the life and mission of the Church, most especially through the domestic church, the family home. In other words, both the setting and the experience of the *catechetical classroom* should be modeled upon the ideals of the domestic church – the first school of discipleship in Christ. In this way, the *catechetical classroom* can become the training ground for life as it is lived fully within the Body of Christ. Practical explanation of this guideline is given in the section below titled *Standard Structure for Catechetical Classes in the Eparchy of Newton.*

The third guideline for a Byzantine catechetical approach is that **parents are the primary catechists of their children.** As such, parents should be encouraged to participate fully in the catechetical process and should be provided with the catechetical tools required to fulfill this important ministry. Parish catechetical programs should seek to supplement, assist, and continue the catechetical formation taking place in the home. For specific instructions, see the section below entitled “Provisions for the Catechesis of Children in the Eparchy of Newton,” points 4 and 5.

The fourth guideline is that **catechists in our Byzantine Tradition should serve as guides, tutors, and models of Christian life, rather than simply as teachers and classroom administrators. Those whom**

they lead are to be treated more like disciples learning to follow Christ than mere students and participants in a program. It is therefore critically important that those who are entrusted with the sacred duty to catechize our children are themselves living a vibrant and dedicated spiritual life within our Melkite tradition. As an ancient saying goes, “we cannot give what we do not have.” Regular attendance at Church services and a committed prayer life, which is lived in accord with the liturgical seasons of the Melkite Church, is a prerequisite for serving effectively as a Catechist in the Eparchy of Newton. Catechists must strive to faithfully adhere to the teachings of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church in both their personal lives (*orthopraxis*) and in their teaching (*orthodoxia*).

The fifth guideline for authentic Byzantine catechesis is that **catechetical classrooms should have an icon corner, if possible in the eastern corner of the room which is the traditional place for prayer.** The icon corner should be a permanent and prominent space in the room and should have nothing obstructing access to it. As a place where the Divine Life is experienced and lived, the *catechetical classroom* should be organized around the icon corner and the icons in the prayer space should be revered and prayed before at the beginning and end of each class period. For specific instructions, see the section below entitled “Standard Structure for Catechetical Classes in the Eparchy of Newton,” points 2, 3, 4 and 8.

The sixth guideline for an authentic catechetical approach within our Byzantine Tradition is that **the use of the Bible should be a regular, constant, and ever-present part of catechesis.** Since the language of Sacred Scripture is the primary “language” of the Divine Liturgy, it is also the primary language of catechesis for all ages. Informed by the principle of *experiential catechesis*, the use of the Bible in our classrooms must be constant, real, and tangible. The **first and most important “text book” which each child should use is their Bible.** While the parish should own extra copies of the Sacred Scriptures, by age nine, at the latest, each child should own and bring their own copy of the Bible with them to each class. Further specific instructions are offered below.

The seventh guideline for a Byzantine approach to catechesis is that **the liturgical seasons of the Church, her fasts and feasts, form the rhythm of both the liturgical and the catechetical year.** Again, all catechesis must be experiential; students must go beyond simply the memorization of dates, times, and seasons. Catechists must seek to guide the children to experience and live the liturgical seasons of the Church year, fasting and feasting together with the entire community, so that the Church’s hymnology, liturgical expressions, and Biblical proclamations become a living reality that impacts their daily lives. Based upon this principle, **within the Eparchy of Newton, the educational content presented by the catechetical textbook in use and determined by the schedule of the academic year should in some way be conformed to the liturgical season in which the Church is living.**

The eighth guideline for an authentic catechetical approach in the Eparchy of Newton is that **all religious education should be in accord with the teachings of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church.** Towards that end, our Eparch, Bishop Nicholas Samra, has identified the *God With Us* catechetical series as the normative textbook series which is to be used by all parishes, missions, and outreaches within the Eparchy of Newton. **No other catechetical series is authorized for use.** Supplemental catechetical materials that are distributed to the student should be reviewed and authorized for use by the Bishop or the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization.

GUIDELINES SUMMARY:

- Catechetical classes are to take place at a time that does not conflict with Sunday Divine Liturgy.
- Catechesis should be experiential in nature.
- Parents are the primary catechists of their children.
- Catechists in our Byzantine Tradition serve more as guides, tutors, and models of Christian life, rather than simply as teachers and classroom administrators, and those whom they lead are to be treated more like disciples learning to follow Christ than mere students and participants in a program.
- Catechetical classrooms should have an icon corner, in the eastern corner of the room if possible.
- Each child enrolled in our catechetical program should own a Bible and bring it to each class.
- Educational content should conform to the liturgical cycle in which the Church is living.
- Religious education should be in accord with the teachings of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church.

PROVISIONS FOR THE CATECHESIS OF CHILDREN IN THE EPARCHY OF NEWTON

- 1) In preparation for the beginning of the Catechetical Year, the Office of Catechesis will provide resources for “Catechetical Sunday.” Catechetical coordinators are asked to make use of these resources by distributing the materials provided, printing flyers and posters, promoting the theme of the Catechetical Year, and generally following the theme of the year in their programs.
- 2) God With Us catechetical books can be ordered at <http://store.godwithusbooks.org/catechetical-series/>
- 3) On October 1 of each year, Pastors will receive a request to update their parish Catechist list and contact information. Pastors are asked to submit their updated Catechist list to the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization no later than November 1 of that year. The updated Catechist Directory will be used by the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization to provide catechetical resources and publish news and announcements throughout the year.
- 4) Each week the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization will email the following resources to Catechetical Coordinators:
 - Epistle and Gospel texts for the coming Sunday;
 - A short 1 – 2 paragraph summary catechesis on the Epistle and Gospel;
 - A link to a resource page for the Resurrectional Troparion of the week, including a video of the with the music and words, and a PDF
- 5) “Seasonal” catechetical programs designed to assist with catechesis within the domestic church will be made available for the fasts and feasts and emailed to pastors and catechetical coordinators.

STANDARD STRUCTURE FOR THE CATECHETICAL YEAR IN THE EPARCHY OF NEWTON

- 1) The Catechetical Year should begin in the month of September with “Catechetical Sunday.” Use of the materials provided through the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization is strongly recommended.
- 2) Prior to teaching, every Catechist and Catechist Assistant must have completed and been certified through the *Virtus* safe environment program and have submitted documentation, including a background check, to the parish Catechetical Coordinator. Prior to the beginning of classes, Catechetical Coordinators are to submit the required *Virtus* documentation to the Chancery. Upon enrollment, every new family should receive a copy of *Raising Champions for Christ*, Paul Leonarczyk. Sophia Press, 2015, available at www.Melkite.org. For more information, please contact the Eparchial Chancellor at 617/323-9922.
- 3) Once the Catechetical Year is launched, an updated Catechist Directory with contact information should be emailed to the Eparchial Office of Catechesis and Evangelization. Parishes are requested to submit the updated directory no later than November 1.
- 4) In addition to the Catechist Directory, parishes are requested to submit an enrollment report, detailing the number of students and families that are registered in the parish catechism program, the number and level of classes provided, and including a comparison chart to the previous Catechetical Year.
- 5) At least twice during the Catechetical Year, all students should be brought into the Church for Holy Confession. In parishes with larger programs, individual classes can be assigned particular Sundays so as not to overburden the clergy and to avoid having students wait in line for too long. For days on which students are to go to Holy Confession, the “Standard Structure for Catechetical Classes” (see below) can be followed in sections 1 – 4. Sections 5 – 6 can be dispensed with and replaced with a catechetical preparation for Holy Confession. Depending on the time available following Holy Confession, sections 7 – 9 can be altered or dispensed with. The class can conclude as determined by the circumstances.
- 6) As explained above, educational content presented by the catechetical textbook in use and determined by the schedule of the academic year, should conform to or in some way be conformed to the liturgical season in which the Church is living. As fasting and feasting seasons change, seasonal catechetical programs will be provided. Catechist Coordinators and Catechists should distribute these publications to parents and integrate them into their catechesis each week.
- 7) The Catechetical Year should conclude in the month of May with a graduation ceremony. If at all possible, this ceremony should take place in the Church Hall or some other appropriate location.

- 8) At the conclusion of the Catechetical Year, a progress report should be submitted to the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization outlining the overall health of the parish program and sharing particular successes and challenges which the parish catechism program experienced during the Catechetical Year.

STANDARD STRUCTURE FOR CATECHETICAL CLASSES IN THE EPARCHY OF NEWTON

- 1) **Arrive early for setup and prayer.** To follow proper safety procedures, the catechist should arrive in the classroom prior to any student. Because the Catechist is a guide and example, upon entering the classroom, Catechists are encouraged to pray before the icon of Christ the Teacher that he or she may fulfill the ministry of catechesis through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that the students may be open to receiving the gift of Divine Life.
- 2) **Students begin by reverencing the icon.** When students / disciples arrive to the classroom they should be accustomed to go immediately to the icon corner to reverence the Icon of Christ or festal icon before being seated. While students are arriving, a CD or smartphone with the Resurrectional Troparion for that Sunday should be played quietly.
- 3) **Classes should begin and end on time.** Catechetical classes should begin at the appointed time and should not be delayed for late arrivals. If some students have not yet arrived, class should begin without them. When late arrivals enter the classroom, they should go immediately to the icon corner, reverence the Icon of Christ, and join the class quietly. The class instruction should not be interrupted to bring the student up to speed unless absolutely necessary.
- 4) **Classes should begin with the Trisagion Prayers and the singing of the Resurrectional Troparion.** Once the time for class has arrived, the students are asked to proceed to the icon corner once more and the class prays the Trisagion prayers together (this could be led by a particular child who has prepared himself or by the class as a whole). The little green *Book of Hours* published by Sophia Press is a great resource as a daily prayer guide. Each student should have a copy of this prayer book and use it to learn the Trisagion prayers. When a child memorizes the Trisagion prayers they could be rewarded with a prayer rope or some other appropriate reward which they can bring to class each Sunday. The Trisagion prayers conclude with the singing of the Resurrectional Troparion. If the teacher is not a confident singer, a CD player or smartphone can be used to assist. After a few cycles of the Eight Tones, use of electronic assistance should become unnecessary. Over time, as Catechists and students become familiar with the prayers, this part of the class will become natural and take very little time to complete. Once familiar, this part of the class should take no more than three minutes. For classes with young children, the catechist may opt to use the Festal Troparion of the parish in place of the Resurrectional Troparion.
- 5) **Use the Biblical citations for the Sunday readings.** After completing the prayers in the icon corner, students find their seats and the Catechist announces the Biblical citation for that particular Sunday (e.g., "The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 13, verse 1). Page numbers are not to be announced. After all the students have opened their Bibles to the appointed passage, all stand while the teacher recites the Gospel. For classes with students under ten years old, it is

important that the catechist recites the Gospel and not the students. For classes of students that are ten years old or older, the first student to find the passage could be allowed to read the Gospel text. Proclaiming the Gospel text is a sacred honor and should be done with decorum. If a student has forgotten to bring their Bible, an extra parish copy should be provided. Again, once familiar with opening their Bible and finding particular passages, this part of the class should take no more than five minutes.

- 6) **Have a short discussion on the Gospel summary.** Following the Gospel, the lesson begins with a short discussion based on the Gospel summary provided by the Eparchial Office of Catechesis and Evangelization in the weekly email. This part of the class should take no more than five minutes.
- 7) **Use the appropriate section of the *God With Us* catechetical series.** Following the discussion of the Gospel passage, the catechetical lesson in the *God with Us* series is studied. Catechists should not attempt to cover every aspect of the material presented in the *God With Us* lesson, but rather focus the students' attention on the most central points. The details of the lesson and the entirety of the unit are to be reviewed and taught at home by the parents. Catechists are encouraged to prayerfully prepare themselves each week for this important time with their students and they should make an effort to present the catechetical lesson within the context of the liturgical cycle in which the Church is living. The Bible, as the "language" of catechesis, should be used regularly throughout the instruction and students should be encouraged to open their Bible and read passages allowed whenever there is an opportunity. In classes for younger ages a craft project is commonly worked on during some part of the catechetical lesson. During the craft project, the Resurrection Troparion should again be played in the background. The catechetical lesson should take about 30 minutes.
- 8) **Practice the Resurrectional Troparion.** During the last ten to fifteen minutes of class a copy of the words and music for the Resurrectional Troparion that are emailed each week from the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization are provided to the students and the class sings the Troparion over and over until it is memorized. This will become easier as the program develops and the children become familiar with the texts. This final part of the class can be done seated at the table or at the icon corner, or it can be begun seated and conclude at the icon corner. Students should be encouraged to take the copy of the Resurrectional Troparion home and share it with their parents. Catechists are encouraged to forward the audio link for the Resurrectional Troparion to the parents during the week.
- 9) **Conclude the class by reverencing the Icon of Christ.**

For more information, clarification, or any other catechetical need, please contact the director of the Eparchy of Newton Office of Catechesis and Evangelization, Father Hezekias Carnazzo, at FatherHezekias@gmail.com.